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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: special economic assistance to individual countries or regions

Emergency assistance to countries affected by hurricanes Jose and Lenny

Report of the Secretary-General**

I. Introduction

1. In October and November 1999, several small island developing States and territories of the eastern Caribbean were struck by hurricanes Jose and Lenny. International, regional and national response efforts were mobilized in support of the affected countries, many of which suffered extensive damage. The onset of these disasters was particularly significant because several of the countries hit by the two hurricanes were still in the process of rebuilding from previous hurricane strikes. Their small, fragile economies are consistently undermined by the effects of recurrent natural disasters and their societies suffer frequent devastation. These influences are also further aggravated by the negative impact of a globalizing world economy and, in particular, the liberalization of international trade and the loss of preferential market access. Most of the effects of the two recent disasters have been economic, affecting the productive infrastructure of the countries and setting back, in many instances, their principal economic sectors. In social terms also, the arrival of the hurricane disasters have occurred at a time of considerable social change brought on by the disintegration of the traditional economic bases upon which social progress and coherence had been maintained.

2. The present report provides an account of the extent of the damages and destruction caused by hurricanes Jose and Lenny, the response of the international community and that of the Governments of the countries affected, as well as an assessment of efforts by the Governments of the Caribbean region as a whole to deal with such occurrences.

II. Background

3. On 19 October 1999, hurricane warnings were issued for countries of the Caribbean Windward and Northern Leeward Islands with the approach of Hurricane Jose. Prior to this date, a hurricane watch was in effect for a number of countries, in particular the British Virgin Islands. The upgrading to hurricane warning was applied to the British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Montserrat, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Anguilla, the territories of Saint Eustatius, Saba and Saint Maarten, along with the

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United States Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Similar warnings were issued by the French authorities for the islands of Saint Martin, Saint Barthelemy and Guadeloupe. Simultaneously, tropical storm warnings were put into effect for Saint Lucia and Barbados.

4. The hurricane moved over the northern Leeward Islands between 20 and 21 October with intense wind speeds of between 90 and 100 miles per hour. Hurricane force winds extended outwards up to 35 miles from the centre of the hurricane and storm force winds outwards up to 115 miles. The hurricane struck the island of Antigua on 20 October 1999, followed by milder impacts in the form of severe tropical storm force winds on Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Anguilla, Dominica, Montserrat and the British Virgin Islands. The storm lost strength on 21 October.

5. With the approach of Hurricane Lenny, tropical storm warnings were put into effect for Jamaica on 14 November 1999. The centre of the hurricane moved closer to the island on that day, with maximum sustained winds of 100 miles per hour. Warnings were also put into effect for Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The hurricane watch was lowered for Jamaica as the hurricane moved away from the island without significant impact. The storm moved towards the northern Leeward Islands, disrupting life in Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Saint Martin. Other islands also affected, but less severely, were Anguilla and Montserrat. The storm was rated originally as a category 5 hurricane, but was eventually downgraded to category 2.

6. Hurricane Lenny lingered over the Caribbean for a number of days, battering the western coastlines of several islands with severe winds, 15 to 20 feet high waves and heavy downpours. It was downgraded to a tropical depression on 20 November 1999 as it moved away from the subregion, leaving extensive material damage although limited loss of life in its wake.

III. Disaster impact

A. Hurricane Jose

7. Antigua and Barbuda was worst affected by Hurricane Jose, with one fatality and confirmed injuries of 15 persons. More than 500 persons from throughout the island were forced to seek shelter because of damage to their homes, with as many as 2,000 persons severely affected. Major roads were flooded, with access to many areas further impeded by fallen trees and debris. Extensive flooding also affected Saint Kitts and Nevis, with several main roads washed out by heavy rainfall and landslides induced by the inundation. No significant damage was reported in the British Virgin Islands and Montserrat, except for small occurrences of landslides in the latter. A number of persons on both islands sought refuge in shelters but were able to return to their homes shortly after the impact.

8. On the island of Anguilla, heavy rainfall of up to six inches occurred in some areas and tropical storm force winds were experienced for approximately five hours on 21 October. Damage, however, was limited to beach erosion in the eastern and southern sections of the island, damage to roads caused by uprooted trees, and damage to the electricity and telephone systems.

B. Hurricane Lenny

9. Severe damages occurred in Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Martin and the United States Virgin Islands, in particular Saint Croix. In each case, damage was largely economic in nature, affecting tourism infrastructure, electricity and telephones. In Antigua, the tourism sector was especially hard-hit as a number of hotels were damaged by winds and flooding, along with the occurrence of extensive beach erosion and mudslides in some places. Several primary and secondary roads were washed away and one major bridge collapsed, cutting off access to the southern part of the island. An estimated 20,000 persons were without safe drinking water as the country's water supply was disrupted by damage to water pumping stations and main pipelines. Housing in low-lying coastal and predominantly lower-income areas were extensively destroyed, resulting in as many as 960 persons seeking sheltered accommodation. A total of 18 houses were completely destroyed, 50 suffered major damage and 80 minor damage.

10. On the twin island of Barbuda, roads were also severely damaged with interior parts of the island made completely inaccessible. Ninety-five per cent of agriculture was destroyed and groundwater contamination occurred across the island. On Saint Kitts, over 200 families were rendered homeless as a

result of destruction caused by hurricane winds. Extensive infrastructure damage was experienced in urban areas and coastal communities, affecting ports, sea defences and road networks. The Government of Grenada moved soon after the impact there to declare a number of villages and parishes disaster areas, including parts of the capital, Saint George. Several homes were destroyed, while others suffered varying degrees of damage.

11. The western coast of Dominica also experienced considerable economic damage as a result of the hurricane's effect on tourism and agriculture. Six hotels suffered severe damage and 35 per cent of the country's banana production was lost. Over 40 per cent of coastal roads were washed away by flooding and heavy rainfall, while a number of piers and ports were damaged. The country's housing stock experienced widespread damage and destruction, with 63 homes totally destroyed, 46 with major damage and 130 with minor damage.

12. Several low-lying communities along the coast of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines were heavily affected by the hurricane. Scores of persons were left homeless from destruction by wind, flooding and tidal waves. Much of the damage here was also economic in nature, with the country's road and port infrastructure being heavily affected. A newly built cruise ship terminal which had not yet been formally opened was severely damaged by the storm causing a further setback to plans to reorient the island's economy into a service-based one in view of the collapse of the European preferential market for bananas.

13. Heavy winds caused storm surges in the tourism region of Saint Lucia, Soufriere, where scores of people were left homeless and several homes washed away. Hotels, restaurants, jetties and port infrastructure were also severely damaged. One death was reported on Saint Maarten and a second on Saint Kitts. In many islands, rainfall reached levels of 10 to 15 inches and, along with storm surges, caused flooding at levels of three to five feet above normal.

IV. Relief and response efforts

14. In all cases, the ability to carry out initial damage assessments was made difficult owing to the heavy toll on physical infrastructure, in particular roads, ports and bridges. Prior to the impact, all national authorities had responded to the various warnings and alerts by putting into effect the preliminary stages of national preparedness plans. Most had, however, moved swiftly to begin repairs to main roads and to clear debris in order to allow relief and damage assessment teams access to affected communities.

15. The Eastern Caribbean Donors Group which monitors natural disaster-preparedness and coordinates relief efforts among international and regional agencies met on each occasion prior to and immediately following the hurricanes. The United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative for Barbados and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States subregion chairs the Donor Group, membership of which includes United Nations programmes and specialized agencies such as the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Development Fund for Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Pan American Health Organization of the World Health Organization and the International Telecommunication Union, bilateral agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department for International Development and the European Union, and regional bodies such as the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the Regional Security System. The Caribbean Disaster Emergency and Response Agency (CDERA) was also pivotal in the coordination of efforts and delivery of relief supplies, as well as in ensuring the application of effective preparedness plans. National, regional and international bodies of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and local and regional non-governmental organizations took an active part in the coordination and relief works carried out after each hurricane.

16. The Coordination Unit operated by CDERA undertook prompt action in contacting the national disaster coordinators in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Dominica and Antigua and Barbuda to ensure the appropriate levels of preparedness were being put into effect. Reports were presented to and discussed by the Eastern Caribbean Donor Group under the chairmanship of UNDP. The state of preparedness and arrangements for the deployment of the rapid needs assessment team

were reviewed by the Donor Group. Prior to the strike of Hurricane Jose, the United States Southern Command made a donation of critical supplies to CDERA. A warehouse stockpile was established of plastic sheeting, water purification tablets and other essential relief items. The regional response mechanism was also placed on early alert and national coordinating authorities acted swiftly in providing relief supplies to affected communities.

17. A rapid needs assessment team was deployed to Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on 21 and 22 November, following Hurricane Lenny. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued eight situation reports on damage, needs assessment and donor contributions. In response to the needs assessment, donations were made by that office, UNDP, Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America. CDB also made pledges of rehabilitation loans for the affected countries. All donations were targeted at providing relief and facilitating damage and needs assessments.

V. Conclusion

18. The passage of the two hurricanes has once again heightened the vulnerability of the Caribbean to natural disasters. Previous experience has, however, left many countries somewhat better prepared than in the past, in particular with respect to the existence of national response and preparedness plans. Considerably higher levels of resources are, however, required so that a more comprehensive planning and response capability can be put into place on a regional basis.

19. With the support of the Government of Italy, UNDP has recently launched a Caribbean disaster reduction initiative with the objective of strengthening the capacities of national Governments and mandated regional organizations in the English, French, Spanish and Dutch-speaking Caribbean in order to mainstream disaster reduction into development and post-disaster recovery. In the context of this initiative, UNDP and the Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance of USAID are supporting CDERA in embedding comprehensive disaster management as a viable process for disaster management in all CDERA member countries in the region and in strengthening CDERA to help achieve this. Once national and regional comprehensive disaster management plans are in place, it is hoped that other donors will contribute financially to their operationalization.

20. UNDP is also committed to coordinating the recovery planning interventions on a regional basis. Disaster planning and mitigation has been singled out as a particularly critical aspect of the UNDP strategy for the Caribbean subregion, and in this regard it will be working closely with multilateral agencies, bilateral donors and the Governments of the region.